REACTION ESSAY

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Reading the papers, the immediate impression is that the project is Arab-centric. This observation is not meant as a criticism, but rather to make a recurring point about the study of Islamism.

By way of this, there are three areas where the phenomenon of Islamism in Southeast Asia differs somewhat from trends identified by several of the papers in Middle Eastern cases.

First, several papers suggest – both explicitly as well as implicitly – that the tension between reformists and traditionalists that defined the pre-Arab Spring study of Islamism may no longer be as pertinent a framework in a post-Arab Spring era. Indeed, the cases of Egypt and Tunisia bear this out, where the main divide is the degree of revolutionary fervor. This is not necessarily the case in Southeast Asia, which was largely unaffected by the Arab Spring. In Indonesia, Arab Spring-type social mobilization in fact took place much earlier, in the late 1990s during the Asian financial crisis that precipitated the end of President Suharto's New Order regime. Indeed, it was this turbulent climate that gave rise to the Islamists of the Brotherhood-inspired Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS.

Second, a striking difference between Southeast Asian Islamists and their counterparts in the Middle East is the participation of Islamists in coalitions which include not only non-Islamist parties, but more notably, non-Muslim parties. In Malaysia, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS) remains a member of a political coalition which includes socialist and non-Muslim parties, though the coalition has started to crumble because of differences between reformists and traditionalists (assuming an "evolutionary scale" of Islamism exists, then Islamism in Malaysia is arguably "less evolved" than in its MENA counterparts?). In fact, PAS has been a member of every political coalition that ever existed in the political history of post-independence Malaysia. As for the PKS, it too was a part of the ruling coalition led by the Democratic Party, and at its peak occupied up to four Cabinet positions. There is scant information in any of the other papers on MENA cases of Islamist participation on ruling or formal opposition coalitions, and

certainly not with non-Muslim parties.

Third, in the case of the PKS, several recent high profile cases of corruption involving senior party officials highlight an interesting point which some of the papers discuss – the matter of fixing, overhauling, or moralizing the political system. In the PKS case it is actually the reverse, where rather than Islamists changing the system, as they claimed to want to do in their early days, you have the system changing the Islamists, who get sucked into the patron-client system that outlived the New Order. There is a further dimension to the discussion on gradualism and the nature of the political system. The comparison between [Morocco](#) and [Kuwait](#) was made in terms of monarchical systems which shape (perhaps constrict?) Islamist activism. Malaysia is also a monarchy (in fact, it has nine sitting monarchs at any given time!) and, though it's a constitutional monarchy, ultimate religious authority is vested in the monarch, not the mufti of the state. I'm not sure if this is similar in other monarchies. Nevertheless, my point is that in reality, the monarch in Malaysia has had very little influence over governance and government. This is largely because royals in Kuwait and Morocco are much more constitutionally and practically powerful, but I thought it was an interesting comparison nonetheless.

The discussions on the Muslim Brotherhood (and its offshoots) that surface in various papers highlight something that could be pursued further in future work on Southeast Asia – the parallel Islamist civil society in Malaysia and Indonesia. The topic of Islamism and Islamist activism in Southeast Asia is one that has been the subject of a vast number of research projects. That said, the majority of this interest has centered on political Islam as expressed in the realm of mainstream politics and focused on partisan politics (as is the case in many of the papers here). On the other hand, there remains a dearth of knowledge and research on urban-based parallel Islamist civil society groups and movements and how their emergence, activism, and transnational nature have reconfigured Islamism in Southeast Asia, particularly recently. In Malaysia and Indonesia, mainstream Islamist parties are being slowly but visibly bypassed by these new groupings that have focused their activities and energies in the civil society sector.

Evidence of this shift – both in public discourse as well as the increased media attention paid to these new groups – can be seen all around Southeast Asia today: From the "public moral policing campaigns" unilaterally conducted by fringe groups like the Front Pembela Islam in Indonesia to the role played by radical groups like the Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia in the aftermath of the tsunami that hit Aceh and the earthquake that devastated Jogjakarta in Central Java. Likewise, in Malaysia new right-wing NGOs and lobby groups like the Persatuan Ulama Malaysia and Teras Keupayaan Melayu have taken center stage on issues ranging from moral policing to the promotion of Malay-Muslim dominance (Ketuanan Melayu), bypassing the more established Malay-Muslim political parties and civil society organizations of the past. It is important to note that once-liminal or marginal figures like the radical cleric Ustaz Abu Bakar Bashir have now moved to the center of public attention. Media reports on how activist Muslim civil society groups frequently mobilize to defend religious rights, as in the case in Malaysia, and to engage in moral policing, often seen in Indonesia, as well as the state's inability or reluctance to rein in these activities, seem to suggest a shift to a right-wing agenda in both countries.

About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

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